United Nations A/C.4/56/SR.13

General Assembly
Fifty-sixth session

Official Records

Distr.: General
7 January 2001
English
Original: Russian

# Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)

**Summary record of the 13th meeting**
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 29 October 2001, at 10 a.m.

*Chairman:* Mr. Hasmy ..... (Malaysia)

## Contents

Agenda item 87: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

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*The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.*

**Agenda item 87: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East**
(A/55/1021-S/2001/735; A/56/13 and Add.1, A/56/290, A/56/375, A/56/382, A/56/420, A/56/421 and A/56/430)

1. **Mr. Hansen** (Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)), introducing his report for the period from 1 July 2000 to 30 June 2001 (A/56/13 and Add.1), said that the tragic events of 11 September in the United States had shocked people all over the Middle East and that the staff of UNRWA were at one with the Secretary-General of the United Nations in condemning terrorist acts and supporting the United Nations in its efforts to counter them.

2. The past year had been a time of great tension in the occupied Palestinian territory, which had seriously affected the Palestinian economy. The majority of Palestinian households and refugee families were living below the poverty line. Although the political developments in the region were beyond UNRWA's mandate, the Agency could not escape their impact, since they affected its day-to-day operations. For decades, UNRWA had been considered a force for stability in the refugee community, and therefore also in the region. However, the events of 11 September, the conflict against terrorism in Afghanistan and the general sense of crisis and uncertainty had also impacted on the situation of refugees. It was very important for the refugees to feel assured that the international community would continue to be committed to their welfare and UNRWA had a central role in that task.

3. It was therefore imperative that UNRWA plan its activities beyond the short term, and to do that it needed sound financial foundations for its plans. Because of the structural budget deficit that had persisted in the past few years, the quality and extent of UNRWA's activities were under serious threat. The Agency's expenditure per refugee had declined from $200 in 1973 to less than $68 in 1999. Yet the demand for its services was growing at a rapid pace: in Gaza alone, the Agency had to provide more than 11,000 new school places every year. Some 93 per cent of Agency schools in Jordan ran on double shifts, and it was a struggle to avoid the introduction of triple shifts. In health centres each doctor had to see more than 100 patients a day.

4. At a meeting in Amman in September 2001, the major donor countries had been informed that, if the cash shortfall was not made up urgently, the Agency would not be able to meet its obligations, including the payment of wages for the month. In order to place UNRWA's finances on a stable footing, meetings had been organized with the Foreign Ministers of the European Union countries and with senior officials in the United States Department of State. Notably, the European Commission had decided to increase its contribution by 45 per cent in the coming year. It was to be hoped that that decision would serve as an example to all the other donors.

5. The continuing debt owed by the Palestinian Authority on account of the non-reimbursement of value added tax (VAT) payments had serious financial implications for the Agency. The debt amounted to about $25 million including accumulated interest. UNRWA supported the Palestinian Authority's proposal that Israel should transfer directly to the Agency $15 million of the VAT and customs duties it had collected, and $6 million of port charges levied. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs had rejected the proposed method of resolving the situation; it was to be hoped that the rejection was temporary. A quick settlement of those issues would contribute greatly towards the reduction of the Agency's budget deficit in the current year. It was gratifying that the Agency's budget proposals had been positively received in the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ).

6. Not only the shortage of resources but also the various restrictions on the movement of people and goods were a serious obstacle to the Agency's humanitarian work. That issue was continuously being brought to the attention of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs at all possible levels, but no progress had yet been made. The Israeli authorities searched Agency vehicles driven by staff holding diplomatic visas and red laissez-passers. Those procedures were inconsistent with the provisions of the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, which stipulated that United Nations property was exempt from search.

7. Despite all the difficulties mentioned, the Agency had made significant progress. Education levels among

the refugees were the highest in the region. UNRWA's Rehabilitation Centre for the Visually Impaired in Gaza City and its job placement scheme had received a prestigious award. The Agency was implementing a management reform programme, which was already producing results in various areas.

8. In conclusion, he thanked all the donors who had supported UNRWA with their contributions and called on them to maintain their support in the future and, if possible, to increase the size of their contributions.

9. **Mr. Brattskar** (Norway), Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, introducing the Working Group's report (A/56/430), said that, during the past year, the Working Group had followed with concern the difficulties experienced by the Agency and, in particular, its serious financial situation. In 2000, UNRWA's cash deficit had amounted to $24.4 million. In previous years deficits in the cash budget had been covered out of working capital. However, that reserve had been fully depleted in 1999. Since income for 2000 had fallen far short of the regular budget, the Agency had been forced to continue the austerity measures introduced in previous years and to reduce expenditure to match income. It had not been possible to allocate any funds towards building up the working capital or salary reserve.

10. By the middle of 2001, the Agency had been facing the prospect of a $66 million deficit by the end of the year in its regular budget for the year. Income for the year had been expected to amount to $280 million, against a budget of $311 million. At the informal meeting of the Working Group in New York on 14 September 2001, the Commissioner-General of UNRWA had said that the Agency faced not only the problem of a budget deficit but also a cash shortage which threatened its ability to meet its commitments in the remaining quarter of 2001.

11. The Commissioner-General had made every effort to keep donors informed of the Agency's financial situation. Many donors had once again in the current year responded generously to the special appeals for funding for UNRWA's regular and project budgets. To ensure a reliable income, UNRWA had appealed to donors to pay their pledged contributions earlier or at least on time. The budget format adopted by the Agency for the biennium 2002-2003 had been well received by ACABQ, which had recommended that the General Assembly should approve it.

12. The Working Group was pleased to note that UNRWA had made significant progress towards eliminating the structural deficit problem, in particular through the introduction of the 1999 Area Staff Rules. The Group welcomed the tireless efforts of the Commissioner-General and his staff to maintain the Agency's basic operations despite the shortage of resources, and also the Commissioner-General's efforts to raise funds and keep donors and host authorities informed about the actual situation with a view to opening new avenues of support and funding.

13. The Group was gravely concerned at the impact of austerity measures on the lives of Palestinian refugees, particularly in the areas of education and health. Additional austerity measures could only aggravate the already disastrous socio-economic situation of the refugees and increase the burden on the authorities in host countries.

14. The Group agreed that the problem of the refugees was rooted in the political problem which had originated more than half a century before and that it remained essential to resolve that problem once and for all in accordance with all relevant United Nations resolutions. However, the problems which the refugees faced every day were of a humanitarian nature and needed to be resolved by the entire international community. The services provided by UNRWA were the minimum required to enable the refugees to lead decent human lives. Any cuts in the level of assistance would not only deprive the refugees of vital services but would also have a destabilizing effect on the entire region. In order to provide UNRWA with a secure financial basis, the Working Group strongly urged all Governments to contribute to UNRWA's budget, increase the size of their contributions and pay them on time, and also urged them to consider making special contributions to cover the deficit and build up working capital so that the Agency could restore services cut as a result of austerity measures, and to ensure that donor support for emergency-related and special programmes or capital projects did not under any circumstances lead to a reduction in contributions to the Agency's regular programmes or the diversion of funds from them.

15. **Mr. Jilani** (Observer for Palestine) thanked the Commissioner-General of UNRWA for introducing the report on the Agency's work and expressed gratitude to

him and his staff for the efforts they were making in a very complex socio-economic and political situation.

16. The policy of a total blockade imposed by the Israeli occupying forces on people, goods and humanitarian aid was further aggravating the situation of Palestinian refugees and leading to an increase in extreme poverty, a sharp increase in unemployment and a deterioration in education and health care.

17. The persistence of such a tragic situation and the escalation of the bloody Israeli campaign against the Palestinian people had given rise to a number of complex problems. Among them, mention should be made of the occupying Power's attitude to UNRWA and its staff and the obstacles which Israel put in the way of UNRWA's efforts to provide basic services and assistance to the population. Similar actions were the scandalous violation of obligations entered into by Israel before the United Nations and its obligations as an occupying Power, which were laid down in international legal instruments and international humanitarian law.

18. He paid a tribute to the work done by UNRWA in the current difficult circumstances, despite the obstacles created by Israel. UNRWA had acted in an efficient and responsible manner, providing emergency assistance to refugee victims, and had also issued a number of urgent appeals which had met with a positive response in the international community. Support should be provided at a level which would meet the Agency's requirements for its regular budget and emergency appeals.

19. In 1948, the General Assembly, in paragraph 11 of resolution 194 (III), had emphasized the right of the Palestinian people to return to their homes or to receive compensation. Since then, that right had been reaffirmed year after year. Yet Israel continued to deny Palestine refugees their rights, including the right to property and a home. At the same time, Israel continued to deny its responsibility for the grievous situation of the refugees.

20. The existing general norms in relation to refugees should also apply, in their entirety, to Palestine refugees. The fact that the situation in which they found themselves had arisen 50 years earlier did not in any way deprive them of the right to return to their homes and to have their property returned to them, particularly taking into account that the main cause of Palestine refugees' continuing distress was the position of Israel, which refused to recognize the rights of Palestine refugees, and its stubborn refusal to agree to any just settlement based on the principles of international law.

21. He underscored the need to guarantee the right of the displaced Palestinian population to return to the Territories that had been occupied by Israel since 1967, in accordance with the resolutions of the United Nations, particularly Security Council resolution 237 (1967) of 14 June 1967. It had been intended that they would return during the transitional period, in accordance with the agreements concluded, but that had not happened because of procrastination on the part of Israel. That had become yet another factor undermining the Middle East peace process and casting doubt on the sincerity of the Israeli side. In his view, a just solution to the problem of Palestine refugees, guaranteeing their rights in the context of a definitive and comprehensive settlement, was an indispensable condition for the establishment of general peace and stability in the region.

22. UNRWA, with the experience it had acquired, could play an important role in solving the problem of Palestine refugees and alleviating their suffering. That role was acquiring ever greater significance in the current dangerous socio-economic situation. As the Commissioner-General of UNRWA had noted time and again, Palestine refugees were the most vulnerable section of the Palestinian population in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including Jerusalem, whether it was a question of the number killed and injured as a result of the bloody Israeli campaign or of the increase in extreme poverty as a result of the closure policy.

23. He also emphasized the important role of UNRWA in providing basic services and meeting the basic needs of refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic. He greatly appreciated the humanitarian services provided by UNRWA and its staff, notwithstanding all the difficulties and risks, and their steadfastness and devotion to duty, and called on all donor countries to lend assistance and support to the Agency so that it could continue to provide basic services to all refugees and to ease their difficult situation. Lastly, he called on his colleagues to work together to ensure the approval in the Fifth Committee of the recommendations set out in the report of ACABQ on the budget of UNRWA.

24. **Mr. Hadidi** (Jordan) said that Jordan wished to assure the Commissioner-General of UNRWA of its commitment to cooperation with the Agency and its support for the Agency's humanitarian endeavours for the welfare of Palestine refugees. Among the United Nations agencies engaged in providing aid, UNRWA had shown itself to be one of the most effective: despite the reduction of its resources, the Agency had organized competent services responsible for education, vocational training, health care and social security.

25. The Palestinian question lay at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and a solution to the problem of Palestine refugees constituted the basis for a comprehensive and peaceful settlement based on international resolutions, particularly resolution 194 (III), which emphasized the right of refugees to return to their homes and to receive compensation. The Peace Treaty between Israel and Jordan stressed that the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people were one aspect of a comprehensive settlement.

26. The fact that UNRWA continued to be operational represented an acknowledgement on the part of the international community of its responsibilities in the face of the tragedy of Palestine refugees. The need for the Agency's existence would continue for as long as the reasons for its establishment persisted.

27. For half a century, the burden of caring for the refugees had weighed more heavily on Jordan than on anyone else. The Jordanian Government's expenditure on refugees was 5.47 times greater than the Agency's expenditure in the entire region, and any reduction in the services provided by the Agency would increase the burden on Jordan. In that connection, his delegation called on the international community not to allow contraction of the role and programmes of UNRWA until the question of Palestine refugees had been solved. It called on donor countries to continue to provide assistance to UNRWA and to ensure that the Agency received the US$ 26 million it needed in order to continue its work for the remainder of 2001.

28. During the period under review, the disparity between the volume of expenditure of the Agency and its income had increased. That was adversely affecting the level and quality of the services provided to Palestine refugees. Helping the Agency meant supporting the peace process itself, while reducing UNRWA services would have a negative effect on the peace process. The calls heard from time to time for a change in the Agency's priorities as a way out of the financial crisis were unacceptable since the needs in the areas of health care and education and the necessity of meeting basic human needs would not go away, particularly as the number of refugees was growing.

29. His delegation appreciated the sincere efforts of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA to increase the number of donors, the support of donor countries and the work of the Agency's staff.

30. **Mr. Cockx** (Belgium), speaking on behalf of the European Union, the associated countries of Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey, said that the Union highly valued the important work done by UNRWA and thanked the Governments of the host countries — Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic — for their constant support for the Palestinian refugees over more than five decades. The Governments of those countries, particularly Lebanon, had often paid a very high price for taking in and meeting the needs of those refugees.

31. The number of refugees whom the Agency was assisting continued to grow, and in 2001 had reached 4 million. At the same time the financial resources from which that assistance was provided were decreasing annually, and the political situation and security environment, particularly in the occupied Territories, were creating additional difficulties. The Agency's difficult financial situation was compromising its ability to assist the refugees. The volume of contributions pledged by the international community to the third emergency appeal was still insufficient, and the contributions to the regular budget were still too low.

32. The European Union was extremely concerned to note that the Agency was having to exist from hand to mouth without having even the minimum funds to cover its essential expenditure, despite efforts to increase the effectiveness of its management and its control over expenditure. The Union shared the concern of the Commissioner-General regarding UNRWA's critical financial situation, and considered that it was essential to strive to broaden the number of donors to the Agency. The European Union itself was the principal donor to UNRWA: the extent of its contribution to the regular budget, as well as to

emergency appeals, had amounted in the past year to US$ 200 million.

33. The European Union could only express regret at the obstacles faced by the Agency in its daily activities in the occupied Palestinian Territories. The Union had frequently approached the Israeli authorities with appeals to lift the closures in the occupied Territories and not to impede the development of socio-economic activities among the Palestinian population. It was high time that the freedom of movement of persons and goods in and between the occupied Territories was restored.

34. The European Union also deplored the fact that the Israeli authorities were making the task of UNRWA staff difficult, if not impossible, by blocking the access of humanitarian and medical convoys and causing damage to UNRWA infrastructures by their military actions. The Union also called on the Israeli authorities to transfer the amount of value added tax and harbour duties owed to the Palestinian Authority.

35. The closures of the occupied Territories were having serious economic, humanitarian and administrative repercussions on the Palestinian population. The fall in economic indicators showed how serious the situation was. In that connection, the European Union urged the parties to seek, together with the Commissioner-General, the speedy, practical and satisfactory solutions which would enable UNRWA to fulfil its mission.

36. The European Union congratulated UNRWA on the quality of services it had provided to the Palestinian refugees in spite of the difficulties hindering its work. The results achieved in the areas of health and education were particularly impressive.

37. Until such time as a comprehensive, just and lasting peace was achieved on the basis of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) of 22 November 1967 and 338 (1973) of 22 October 1973, UNRWA must continue to fulfil its mandate, for which it must have the necessary resources at its disposal. The European Union would continue to support UNRWA both politically and financially.

38. **Mr. Zaki** (Egypt) said that the General Assembly was embarking on its discussion of the first item pertaining to the Middle East on the agenda of its current session at a time when the tanks of the Israeli army were patrolling the streets of Palestinian towns and the bullets of the Israeli army were killing dozens of Palestinians. The delegation of Egypt was angered and saddened by those circumstances, and its feelings were deepened by the fact that in the corridors of the United Nations there was much talk of human rights, the rights of refugees and what States should and should not do to protect the right of the individual to a dignified life. However, all those sentiments lost their meaning when the issue related to the rights of Palestinians and Palestinian refugees. States which lectured every day on the need to defend human rights were turning a blind eye to the injustice and blatant violation of those rights by Israel — the occupying Power.

39. As for the report of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA, the delegation of Egypt, firstly, condemned strongly the continuing violation by Israel of its legal obligations under international humanitarian law and under the agreements that the Israeli authorities had signed with the Agency, especially the agreement of 1967. Egypt implored the international community to stand unified in demanding Israel's commitment to its obligations, specifically relating to the freedom of movement of UNRWA personnel and their vehicles transporting humanitarian assistance.

40. Secondly, Egypt welcomed the steps taken by UNRWA to address the situation resulting from the total blockade imposed by the occupying Power in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. Egypt requested the international community, and especially those States that had the financial capacity to contribute, to assist in the alleviation of the effects of that inhuman blockade by contributing to the Agency's implementation of programmes and responding to its emergency appeals.

41. Thirdly, Egypt supported the proposed budget for 2002-2003 and welcomed the recommendation of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) regarding its adoption. Egypt also supported the request to establish five new international posts for the Agency to be financed under the regular budget.

42. Finally, Egypt requested the Secretariat immediately to pay the sum of US$ 5.1 million which it owed to UNRWA in connection with the transfer of the Agency's headquarters to Gaza. The payment of that sum as soon as possible would be of great importance in light of the Agency's difficult financial situation at the present critical stage of its existence.

43. The Palestinian refugees had certain inalienable rights, in particular the right to return to their homes and the right to compensation, which were laid down in many General Assembly resolutions, starting with resolution 194 (III). A just and lasting settlement of the Palestinian question had to be based on that resolution. However, any discussion of a settlement and of peace currently seemed hopeless, given Israel's continuing occupation of Palestinian Territories, and it was therefore vital to remember that the services provided by the Agency to the Palestinian people in all fields were important and necessary. That fact obliged all donors to continue making voluntary contributions to the Agency's activities.

44. Egypt supported UNRWA's work and urged all donors and other members of the international community concerned about establishing peace in the Middle East to make efforts to ensure that the occupying Power refrained from its expansionist policies and chose the path towards peace.

45. **Mr. Ahsan** (Bangladesh) said that his delegation attached special importance to the activities of UNRWA, which should be highly commended, and welcomed the report of the Commissioner-General, which presented a comprehensive picture of the Agency's activities over the past year.

46. The reporting period had been marked by a high degree of violence in the Palestinian Territories and an increased burden on the inhabitants, and also strangulation of the Palestinian economy as a result of the restrictions imposed on movement. All those factors had led to an increase in the number of refugees being cared for by UNRWA. In that situation, the Agency had a special responsibility to boost the morale of the Palestinian people.

47. The delegation of Bangladesh was deeply concerned about Israel's interference in UNRWA activities, particularly the imposition of restrictions on the movement of its staff. In addition, Agency staff had been detained and subjected to attacks and harassment, and even the Commissioner-General had not escaped such treatment. Bangladesh strongly condemned those acts, which violated international law and the agreement between UNRWA and Israel, and urged Israel to lift all restrictions on the movement of Agency staff and not to interfere in their work.

48. Bangladesh welcomed the institutional reform undertaken by the Agency to enable it to respond more efficiently and effectively to the needs of the Palestinians. It also welcomed the expansion of microfinance and microcredit facilities in the West Bank after their successful introduction in Gaza, and would be happy to share its own experience in that field.

49. His delegation was alarmed to note that the Agency's financial situation had deteriorated as the Middle East crisis deepened. It therefore urged donors to respond to the needs of the Agency and provide it with financial assistance beyond their pledged contributions. Mindful of the needs of the Palestinians, Bangladesh recommended extending the Agency's mandate for another three years, and until a just and comprehensive solution to the Palestinian problem was achieved.

50. **Mr. Assaf** (Lebanon) said that, although UNRWA had originally been created as a temporary agency to provide assistance to Palestinian refugees, 50 years later the General Assembly was forced to renew the Agency's mandate once again, chiefly because of Israel's refusal to uphold the refugees' right to return to their homes.

51. The refugee problem was one of the major aspects of the Palestinian question, particularly for Lebanon, in whose territory 383,000 Palestinians lived, making up 10 per cent of the country's population. In that connection, he thanked the representative of Belgium, who had mentioned in his statement the difficulties faced by Lebanon as a result of its taking in such a large number of refugees.

52. Recalling Lebanon's position on the problem of Palestinian refugees, he said that, first of all, it was necessary to guarantee the refugees' right to return to their homes, which had been affirmed repeatedly in General Assembly resolutions. Secondly, Lebanon rejected the idea of permanently settling the refugees in its territory, since that would in principle violate the Lebanese Constitution because the actual number of Palestinian refugees exceeded Lebanon's capacity to receive them and also because the refugees themselves did not want to live in camps permanently, but rather stood by their right of return and their right to create an independent State.

53. The current situation was also exacerbated by the fact that Israel was impeding UNRWA and harassing its staff in every way possible. The Agency's report mentioned cases of detention of UNRWA staff in

violation of the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, cases of shooting at Agency schools and damage to other Agency sites, the imposition of restrictions on movement between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which had affected even the Commissioner-General himself, and the non-payment by Israel of the sums it owed the Agency. Consequently, Lebanon urged the international community to put pressure on Israel to refrain from such violations in the future and to abide by the international conventions.

54. Lebanon greatly appreciated the services provided by the Agency to Palestinian refugees, particularly in the areas of education, health care and social assistance, and emphasized that it was important for the Agency to continue its work of registering the refugees and issuing them with identity papers which allowed them to retain their status as refugees and Palestinian citizens and to exercise their right to return to their homes in due course.

55. Turning to the Agency's critical financial situation, he noted that the current level of contributions was insufficient in view of the natural increase in the number of refugees. He therefore urged donors to increase their contributions to the Agency's budget.

56. In conclusion, Lebanon reiterated that the only way to solve the refugee problem was for them to return to their homes in accordance with General Assembly resolutions and international law, and reaffirmed its commitment to the establishment of a just and lasting peace, pursuant to Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973). That process had to presuppose an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Syrian Golan and the implementation of the right of all the refugees to self-determination and the creation of their own State.

57. **Mr. Alatas** (Indonesia) said that his country had been observing with deepening concern the progressive deterioration of the situation in the occupied Territories, which had drastically affected the lives of Palestinian refugees. It behove the international community to put an end to the inhuman carnage of innocent civilians and immediately to call on Israel to lift the restrictions on the movement of staff and goods in line with the agreements concluded between UNRWA and Israel and the norms of international law. It was Indonesia's steadfast conviction that there could be no settlement of the refugee problem unless there was a just and comprehensive settlement of the whole question of Palestine.

58. It was heartening to note that, in the conditions of a serious worsening of the economic situation in the occupied Palestinian Territories, the international community had acknowledged the urgency of the situation and had responded to UNRWA's appeals for emergency assistance to the refugees. UNRWA was to be commended for the fact that in conditions of dire budget deficit it was seeking non-traditional ways of minimizing its costs and striving to improve the efficiency and quality of its services, where there were clear achievements in the fields of education and health care, and the successful income-generation programmes.

59. If UNRWA's financial situation was not remedied, it would profoundly affect not only the humanitarian services provided to the Palestinian people but also stability throughout the region. Thus, it was of the utmost importance that UNRWA programmes be placed on a sound financial footing.

60. UNRWA served as a symbol of the commitment of the international community to the provision of assistance to the Palestinian people in its aspiration to realize its hopes and expectations. Indonesia remained convinced that the Palestinian people, thanks to the efforts of UNRWA, would be able to secure lasting peace, stability and development in its own homeland.

61. **Mr. Rani Ismail Hadi** (Malaysia) said that his delegation was greatly concerned at the deteriorating situation in the occupied Palestinian Territory, which was adversely affecting the Palestinian refugees in Gaza and the West Bank. The almost uninterrupted violence since September 2000 had taken a heavy toll in human lives and injuries.

62. The measures taken by the Israeli Government in the name of security had reached dangerous and untenable proportions. Protracted blockades and other measures to which the Israeli authorities in the occupied Palestinian Territories resorted often prevented the movement of UNRWA staff and the delivery of emergency relief. His delegation noted with concern that during the reporting period restrictions on the movement of Agency staff and goods had continued. It called on the Israeli authorities to remove those restrictions and to respect the agreements signed between Israel and UNRWA. It further called on Israel

to desist from taking further military actions and to seek a political settlement.

63. His delegation placed the very highest value on UNRWA's service to the international community over the past 50 years. It also commended the Governments of Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as the Palestinian Authority, for their assistance to the refugees.

64. His delegation was seriously concerned at the precarious financial situation of the Agency. In that regard, it firmly supported the proposal made in his statement by the Commissioner-General of UNRWA that Israel should transfer to the Agency US$ 15 million collected in value added tax and customs duties and US$ 6 million as harbour dues.

65. The delegation of Malaysia commended the serious efforts undertaken by the Commissioner-General in seeking increased contributions from traditional donors, as well as seeking to expand the Agency's donor base. In making its own modest annual contribution to the UNRWA budget, Malaysia urged Member States, particularly the developed countries, to continue or to increase their contributions to enable the Agency to fulfil its noble mission of alleviating the plight of the Palestinian refugees. It was to be hoped that the financial situation of UNRWA would improve in the months ahead.

66. **Mr. Maitland** (South Africa) said that his delegation commended the efforts of UNRWA to provide much-needed assistance to Palestinian refugees under difficult conditions. The services of UNRWA were all the more crucial as the economic and social hardship suffered by the Palestinian people was aggravated by the Israeli policies of closures and restrictions on free movement. His delegation was concerned at the negative effects of those policies on the Agency's work and called on the Government of Israel to make every effort to ensure the free movement of Agency staff and goods in accordance with the relevant agreements and international law.

67. His delegation believed that, in those circumstances, the international community should exert every effort to ensure adequate funding for the work of UNRWA.

68. His delegation unequivocally supported the struggle of the Palestinian people to attain their inalienable rights, including the right to return to their homeland and to have their own independent State with East Jerusalem as its capital. The right of Palestinian refugees to return to their original homes, enshrined in, inter alia, General Assembly resolutions, was of fundamental significance in the search for a just and durable settlement of the refugee question. That right had been reaffirmed at the recent World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance.

69. Lastly, Israel's policy of closures and restrictions on the movement of goods, persons and resources constituted collective punishment of a civilian population, which was expressly prohibited in the Fourth Geneva Convention. It was therefore incumbent on the international community to take steps to ensure respect for international humanitarian law in the occupied Palestinian Territory in order to protect civilians.

70. **Archbishop Martino** (Observer for the Holy See) said that although both UNRWA and the Pontifical Mission for Palestine had been founded as temporary agencies, for over 50 years they had been labouring to assist Palestinian refugees. Unfortunately, violence in Israel and the occupied Territories continued to take innocent lives. During his recent pilgrimage to the Syrian Arab Republic, Pope John Paul II had declared that real peace could be achieved only through mutual understanding and respect among the peoples of the region and among the followers of the three Abrahamic religions.

71. During the recent incidents in the Christian towns of Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala, Catholic institutions and numerous houses had suffered shell damage. The Pontifical Mission for Palestine was making emergency grants to help residents with repairs or relocation. In that connection, Pope John Paul II had declared that violence was a path of death and destruction which dishonoured the holiness of God and the dignity of man.

72. Meanwhile, the students of the Pontifical University of Bethlehem had been able to complete the school year, the Pontifical Mission for Palestine had built and opened "Brotherhood park" in Gaza City, and a children's park had been opened in Bethlehem. With the assistance of European philanthropic agencies, the Pontifical Mission had been able to develop and fund programmes to put the unemployed to work.

73. His delegation hoped that, beyond addressing humanitarian needs, a solution would be found for the various multifaceted problems of the region, including the question of the Holy City of Jerusalem. His delegation reaffirmed the need for "internationally guaranteed provisions to ensure the freedom of religion and of conscience of its inhabitants, as well as permanent, free and unhindered access to the Holy Places by the faithful of all religions and nationalities" (General Assembly resolution ES-10/2). It called for greater international solidarity and political will to overcome violence in a region awash in weapons and appealed to the international community to help bring about a just resolution of the differences between the peoples of the Holy Land, who were all cousins in the Abrahamic faith. As Pope John Paul II had declared during his pilgrimage, the world looked to the Middle East with hope and concern, expectantly awaiting every sign of constructive dialogue.

*The meeting rose at 12.15 p.m.*